**Telephone interview with Robert Chalfant, corpsman aboard USS *Hancock* (CVA-19) during Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 11 January 2007.**

**Where are you from originally?**

From California. I was born in Burbank and then moved up to Walnut Creek outside of San Francisco. I lived there for most of my life and eventually went to Washington State, then back to Southern California. I enlisted when I lived in Yorba Linda.

**What year was that?**

I enlisted in 1971 and went thru boot camp in San Diego in February 1972.

**Where did you go after that?**

From there I went to Hospital Corps School in San Diego.

**Had you decided you wanted to be a corpsman or did they just select you for it?**

I was a pre-med major and wanted to be a doctor. If your scores were good in boot camp, you could get the school you requested. As it turned out, if you had a half a head on your shoulders, you could do very well on any of the Armed Forces tests. They were pretty simple. If you graduated high school and paid some attention, you could score pretty well on the AFQT [Armed Forces Qualification Test]. So I pretty much had a guarantee in getting into corps school.

**Where did you go after corps school?**

I got orders to Naval Hospital Guam and arrived there towards the end of October 1972.

**Were you a ward corpsman?**

Yes. I worked Ward B-3--surgery.

**Was there any fear at that time of going with the FMF?**

No. But I didn't even know at that time that the Marines were part of the Navy or that Navy corpsmen served with Marines in the field until midway through hospital corps school. That actually blew plan A. I enlisted in the Navy to avoid the draft. The idea was "I go in the Navy. I become a hospital corpsman. I don't get shot." All of a sudden I learned that Navy corpsmen serve in the field with the Marines as medics.

**How long were you at Guam?**

I was there for close to 2 years before I got orders to the *Hancock* in August 1974.

**How did you get those orders?**

By getting out of orders to Fleet Marine Force twice. At that time Guam had scaled back handling Vietnam casualties. We only ran a medicine ward, a surgical ward, and a labor and delivery ward, and an ICU. So there was just a skeleton crew manning the hospital at that time. Everyone knew everyone else. We didn't even salute.

To stay out of the FMF, I had to extend my tour at Guam for 3 months. The second time was something similar to that. Finally, the third time CDR Patrowski said "Chalfant, you're going to go out on one of the big boats."

The *Hancock* didn't ring a bell at all. I had never heard of it. The only carrier I had heard about at that time was the *Enterprise*. I was to report to the *Hancock* at its home port in San Diego. I lived in Yorba Linda in Orange County, a 90-minute drive away. I knew the *Hancock* was home ported in Alameda but being a good sailor I followed my orders and reported for duty in San Diego, and picked up an additional 3 days of travel time to make the drive up there, a 5- or 6-hour drive.

**What went through your head when you saw the *Hancock* for the first time?**

I didn't see much of the ship because it was in a yard period. The island structure was completely enclosed in scaffolding. The flight deck was in the process of beginning to be replaced so there was no flight deck on it. The ship was the last of the World War II carriers to serve active duty in World War II. It had been hit by two kamikazes--the whole 9 yards. It had a wooden flight deck covered with a rubberized asphalt surface. And that limited what kind of aircraft they could fly. If they tried landing an F-4, it would go through the flight deck. They only flew A-4s and F-8 Crusaders.

**Where were you assigned on the ship?**

To sick bay, of course. At that time, I was the only guy who was actually living on board as a corpsman. A lot of the other guys were married and lived in the area.

A few days later they sent me back down to San Diego for audiometric technician training. I became the guy who checks people's hearing. I was down there for about a week and then returned to the ship. Because I knew how to type, they made me the medical admin guy.

But before that happened, I got sent to Oakland Naval Hospital for a few weeks for on-the-job training as an ear, nose, and throat technician.

**When did the ship finally deploy?**

I think it was February '75. But before we could do that, the ship had to go through some exercises to get ready. It was train, train, train, then come back into port. Then go back out and do it all over again. Then we took what they called "Reftra"--refresher training. Then we had to go through an operational readiness examination to certify that both ship and crew were ready to deploy. And we passed that.

These things were always a question with the *Hancock*, not so much for personnel, even though we had a very high percentage of inexperienced sailors aboard the ship. The issue was that the ship was so old. We were always worried about having what they called "mechanical casualties." When we hit about 25 knots, the thing would start vibrating. We had to put rods down through the handles of our file drawers to keep them from flying out. Apparently, it had a bad mount for one of its shafts.

The ship's top speed was about 30 knots. As part of the operational readiness exam, the ship was called upon to go from 30 knots to full reverse. And a bunch of us were worried as to what would happen then. Would the ship stay together or would all the shafts fall apart. But we made it.

A new captain was aboard named Fred Fellows. He was an ex-aviator like all carrier skippers are. He had an obsession with doing field days on the ship. Of course, the reason was it was an old ship and we had to be constantly after the thing to keep it clean. That ship was due to be retired.

I recall having an opportunity to go aboard the *Enterprise*, which was tied up at a pier across from us at Alameda. Getting on board the *Hancock* was too tough. You just went up on the quarter deck or the afterbrow, showed your ID card. On the *Enterprise*, you just didn't walk on board. I requested permission to come aboard and then I had to have an escort. Finally, my buddy from Guam, who was now a corpsman aboard the ship, came up and showed me around. I couldn't even touch the overhead. It was about 8 feet high. In the *Hancock*, I could hit my head on the overhead with the bundles of wiring. Also, on the *Hancock*, you couldn't walk in a straight line down the passageways very far without hitting a hatch or having to go around some ductwork or something. On the *Enterprise*, I could look down a passageway and almost see the end of the ship. The crewmen had small personal air conditioners on their bunks, curtains to go around them, and personal cabinets to store their gear under their bunks.

I had the top rack on the *Hancock*. I had air conditioner ducting going straight over the top of my rack. And as skinny as I was, I had to decide whether I was going to sleep on my back or my stomach that night because I couldn't roll over.

**Getting into the early spring of 1975--early April, when things in Vietnam started to go to pieces–do you remember the ship getting orders to proceed there?**

Being enlisted, we got the word but they left out most of the background information. One of the good things about our captain, he did communicate with us. Somewhere between San Francisco and Hawaii, the captain came over the 1MC and announced that we'd received orders to proceed at full speed to Hawaii. Prior to us getting there, we started launching aircraft that flew into Hawaii. When we pulled into the pier at Pearl Harbor, we were greeted by all these Marines and their gear.

I think we only stayed there a few days. We then loaded up the Marines. At some point I was moved from being the medical admin guy to being in charge of medical supply. That was the first thing I remember related to the evacuations.

**How many corpsmen would there have been aboard the *Hancock* at that time?**

I'd say close to 30. We had ship's company. Then during a normal deployment, we also had a few of the squadron corpsmen come and work in the medical department. Most of those guys either left in Hawaii or in the Philippines. Then we had three or four MDs. We had an MSC lieutenant who was the admin officer. One of the doctors, LCDR Chuck Dennis, was the senior medical officer. We also had two chiefs.

The sick bay was an oversized exam room. The main passageway was where most of the activity took place. It went between some of the compartments in sick bay. There was also one operating room.

**After you had gone into the Philippines and picked up more supplies, where did you go from there?**

As we were cruising into the PI through all these little islands, I saw this line of old CH-46 and CH-53 helicopters coming out to the ship packed with Marines and their gear. They landed three at a time, offloading all their men and gear, and then taking off. Then three more would land and do the same thing. This went on for hours.

AH-1 Cobra gunships were fairly new to Vietnam and they flew a few of those aboard the ship. If you could have seen all the gear they were bringing aboard--105 howitzers and all sorts of stuff in containers. It looked like we were going in to invade the place rather than pull

off an evacuation. But I guess the whole idea was to be prepared because anything could happen. There were a lot of doubts about what was going to happen with the South Vietnamese Army as the North was coming down on them. Were they gonna run? Were they gonna fight? And how well would they be able to hold when the pressure was on? What would happen in Saigon itself?

When we got to Cubi Point, they continued to load more Marines on board. We then went to MEDMART to pick up supplies for sick bay.

**What was MEDMART?**

It was a place you could go in with a shopping list and a few shopping carts--like Sam's--and pick out whatever drugs we needed. For narcotics and other controlled drugs, we had to fill out forms. They'd fill the order and then we'd sign for the supplies.

**Did you then head for Vietnam?**

Yes. It seems as though we made our way west. We were allowed to go into Singapore, which was to be a 4-day stay. I was aboard the ship the first night when the captain called for everyone to return to the ship. Orders came to pull up the anchors and head for Vietnam. Every morning I went up on the flight deck as part of my routine. On this morning, I saw the most amazing sight I'd ever seen. There were more ships out there than I had ever seen in one place in my life. It looked like one of those task forces you'd seen in the movies about World War II. From the horizon 360 degrees were ships. Suddenly, another aircraft carrier came chugging by. There were at least four aircraft carriers out there and large numbers of destroyer size ships. Many civilian ships were also out there.

**Did you have inkling as to what was going on?**

All these ships came as a complete surprise. Eagle Pull, which was the evacuation of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, is a complete blank in my mind. I don't recall a single about that operation. It was a non-operation as far as we were concerned.

But Operation Frequent Wind was definitely a big deal. It looked as though the U.S. was prepared for just about any contingency. There we were cruising up and down the coast. Finally, our officers revealed to us the plans for the medical department. We had already done a massive vaccination of the ship's company. Instead of going through every single health record, we just decided to give everyone new vaccinations. We broke out all our air injection guns and had two corpsmen on each side of the huge line of people, and we nailed each crewman with about six injections.

**So you were all vaccinated in preparation for what you might be exposed to?**

Yes. We had no idea what might be brought aboard the ship by refugees. It could be yellow fever, plague, smallpox--nobody knew. So when in doubt, vaccinate them all.

Towards the end of April I was assigned to head up Triage Team 1. My job was to lead this group made up of two other corpsmen and a bunch of stretcher bearers from several of the ship's divisions. We were stationed in the hangar bay and very near the elevator furthest aft on the port side. That elevator was normally used to move aircraft from the hangar deck to the flight deck and vice versa. The location was the initial place where a casualty would be seen for medical attention.

My primary responsibility was to sort the casualties. Those who were less injured and could be attended to quickly would be sent ahead to another place in the hangar bay which was an existing battle dressing station. These battle dressing stations were manned during general quarters. Thank God, we didn't get any casualties and I didn't have to go through this.

**Did you ever get up on the flight deck and see these choppers coming in filled with refugees?**

Over the 1MC they would announce "Frequent Wind" or some other code word. Then we would launch all the helicopters to go out and sortie into Saigon, load up with evacuees, and then return to the ship and offload them. Unfortunately, many false alarms occurred. We spent 3 days and nights living in the hangar bay waiting for the ambassador [Graham Martin] to show up. And we did this over and over again. I guess he thought he could still save the country or something.

All of a sudden every ship gathered out there picked up on their radars all these helicopters coming to us from Vietnam--not us going in there--but them coming out to us. Suddenly we had to get all the helicopters that were already on our deck out of there so the others coming out would have a place to land. It seemed that every Vietnamese who could fly a helicopter loaded up his family, friends, and neighbors and whatever junk they wanted to take, got aboard a helicopter, and flew out to the ships at sea.

**What did you do with your own helos?**

They went up in the air. It was so chaotic! I don't think there was any radio traffic going on between those aircraft coming out to us and the ships. These people were just looking for any big platform to land on. Some just ditched in the ocean, hoping to get picked up. But it was mostly those little Hueys you see in movies about Vietnam. It looked like there were just thousands of them.

So after all our helicopters got off, the Vietnamese started landing on our ship. I was watching from the hangar bay out through where the elevator was supposed to be. Several times we thought they were going to fly right into the hangar bay. But they would eventually land on the deck to be greeted by a committee of armed Marine guards. They'd make them surrender any weapons they had. And they had a ton of weapons! Then they'd move them over to the island structure and sort them out from there.

**These were men, women, children?**

Men, women, and children of all ages--grandfather, uncle, aunt--the whole 9 yards. With the choppers I saw come in, it seemed like portions of family units rather than a bunch of soldiers. I did, however, see one or two helos carrying ARVN soldiers. With one, the Marines had a problem securing their weapons. I don't exactly know what happened but eventually they gave them up.

**When you say weapons, you're talking about rifles, pistols, grenades . . .**

M16s, everything. I saw a huge pile of these weapons that had been seized. Eventually, they were simply pushed over the side of the ship.

I concentrated on my little part of the operation. If I was privy to what else was going on as far as the medical department, I don't remember.

They eventually separated the men from the women and children. The women were examined for hidden weapons, drugs--that kind of thing.

It quickly became apparent that there would be no mass casualties. The senior medical officer came to me and gave me an armload of KY jelly and boxes of latex gloves and told me to follow him. We went to the port side of the island structure and they began bringing these Vietnamese men around, about 10 at a time. The doctor told me to "hold the gloves, pour some KY on my fingers. We're going to do rectal exams on these people. We're supposed to check for weapons and drugs."

I guess I could envision a grenade, but certainly not a pistol. That would be a little tough. None of these men spoke English or certainly didn't act like they did. I, too, probably would have been surprised if someone asked me to pull my pants and shorts down and hang on to the railing. "Welcome to America!"

Afterward, the refugees were sprayed against any bugs they might have carried aboard. Then they were all escorted down into the hangar bay to a cordoned off area. A load of cots had been set up down there. I don't know how many people were expected to come aboard and what they had planned for, but we now had taken aboard some 2,200 people.

**What was the attitude of these people? Were they elated to be aboard? Did they look scared or disoriented?**

You pretty much described what I saw. Disorientation was the predominant emotion. It must have been because of the suddenness that everything had happened. Maybe these helicopter pilots had planned all this out ahead of time with their families. I saw a helicopter land with some bicycles on it! You fly out to a ship at sea, escaping with your life, and you bring your bicycles with you? What is this deal?

Because of the warm climate in that part of the world, the people were fairly comfortable on the hangar deck. We had some porta-potties set up. We also had some crowd control; we just couldn't let these people wander around the ship--both to keep them and the sailors out of trouble.

As things settled in, the mood seemed to be pleasant apprehension for the future.

**Was it a festive mood?**

I wouldn't call it festive.

**Was anyone smiling?**

Yes. I saw some smiles, and there was a lot of interaction between the refugees and the sailors and Marines. It must be some kind of American thing. Our military guys just seemed to have this thing about making visitors feel comfortable. And these folks obviously needed some comfort.

Some sailors put together a makeshift band and were marching through these people and playing with the kids. The sailors and Marines went out of their way to make the Vietnamese a little better about the situation.

**Did you or any of the medical folks have to treat any serious problems.?**

Briefly, we saw one little, old lady who had diarrhea. Another young teenage girl had some kind of abdominal problem. I believe we did an appendectomy on her. But it turned out that she had a very bad case of intestinal flu or something. I don't recall any other serious problems. I recall bringing some vitamin C and some codeine to a Vietnamese doctor on the hangar bay because there was some flu-like disease going on. Unlike in the U.S. where they tell

you to go home, drink plenty of fluids, rest, and take aspirin, this doctor would give them a bunch of Vitamin C, have them drink fluids, and give them some codeine to make them feel better. I like that treatment myself.

**How long did all this activity go on? One day, 2 days . . .?**

I think it started early one day and continued until early the next morning--roughly 24 hours. It was late into the night and helicopters were still flying in and out. I believe the last two casualties of the Vietnam War occurred right off the side of the *Hancock* when we lost a helicopter. It was a CH-46, one of the helicopters that was used to run a sea-air rescue operation. It was just circling around the ship in case an aircraft went down. It was hot and the air was thin and they were constantly having to offload fuel so they could stay airborne. Sometimes they'd get pretty low on fuel but would be able to get aboard the ship to be refueled. They didn't even stop the engines but "hot-fueled." And then, just as quickly, they'd take off.

For whatever reason, this helicopter just ran out of fuel. It was right beside the ship when it went down. All of a sudden the ship just stopped. It was pitch-black out. All hands were up on deck looking out trying to see these individuals. Even in daylight, it's hard to see people on the ocean; it's nearly impossible. Luckily, a strobe light on one of their vests lit up. And there he was. The pilot and co-pilot had gone down with the helicopter, but one of our helicopters recovered two of the crewmen . One or both needed surgery and they were brought down to sick bay. One guy had a compound fracture of the femur on one leg. They had to do an internal reduction and external fixation.

**With all these Vietnamese helicopters landing on the deck, I recall pictures from that time showing crewmen just pushing these things over the side. Did you see any of that?**

Yes. Initially, once they got the helicopters unloaded, they would move the helos onto one of the elevators, bring them down, and pack them into the hangar bay. They were perfectly good helicopters and there was no thought of throwing them over the side. But then we kept accumulating and accumulating helicopters, including some of the silver-painted Air America helicopters from the CIA.

It soon became evident that we were running out of room. So a decision was made to strip out their instrument panels, get them back up on deck, and begin pushing them over the side. This was all except for the silver ones; we weren't allowed to touch those.

**Did you have any personal dealings with the refugees?**

I had a very brief interaction with a Vietnamese doctor but that was it. As it turned out, we didn't have to deal with a lot of illness or injuries. But those people weren't on the ship that long, either.

**Where did you go after Operation Frequent Wind was over?**

We went back to Subic Bay and offloaded all these refugees. After that they washed down the hangar bay and flight deck, where the people had congregated, with fire hoses.

**How much longer were you in the Navy after this incident?**

I was discharged the same day the *Hancock* was decommissioned on 30 January 1976. I walked off the ship with my sea bag over my shoulder and dressed in my civilian clothes during the decommissioning ceremonies.

**That's a pretty dramatic conclusion to a Navy career.**

Except the band wasn't playing at that particular moment.

**What did you do when you left the Navy?**

I had to make up my mind whether I would stay in California or join my folks who had moved to Nashville, Tennessee. I gradually made my way to Nashville and then decided to go to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

Three years later they allowed me to graduate. After college I ended up getting a job selling portable, emergency oxygen systems and doing CPR courses. Then I got a job in Nashville managing an auto parts store. I did that for about a year before my dad hired me to work for him as supervisor. Then a company called Wagner Brake and Lighting Products hired me as a customer service rep. I worked there for a few years and then another guy and I set up our own manufacturer rep firm.

After my partner bought me out, I went to work for Ryobi Power Tools, a Japanese company. I started off as a salesman and then became their corporate trainer and did that up through April of 1999. And for the most part, I've been out of work since. I had cancer and then one medical problem after another.

**How are you doing now?**

I talk pretty well but I'm bored stiff. But I've had 2 years of relatively good health and things are looking up.

**It's been over 30 years since that time off the coast of Vietnam. Do you ever think about it anymore?**

Yes. And I keep kicking myself for not staying in the Navy.

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